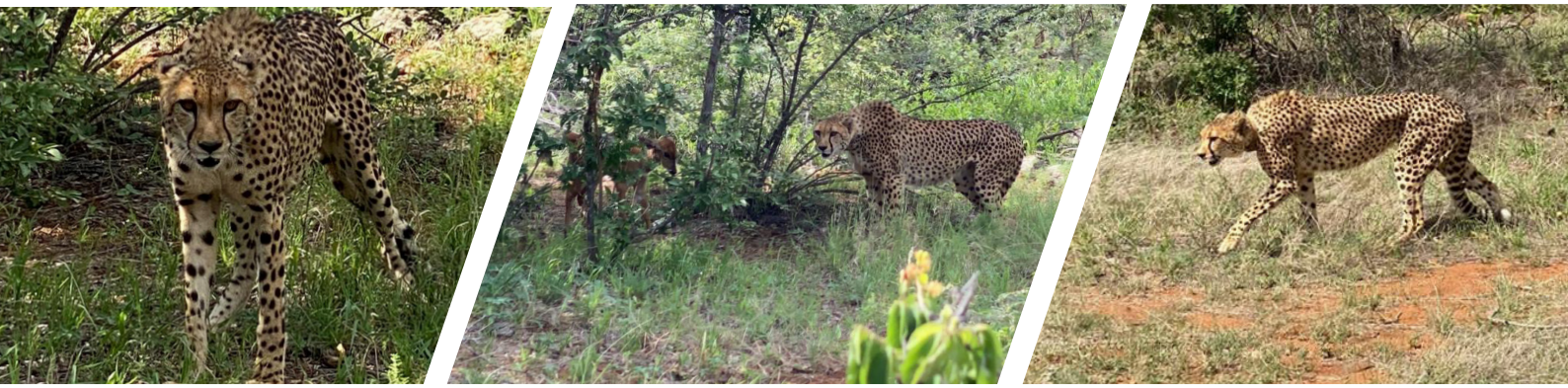
HOEDSPRUIT ENDANGERED SPECIES CENTRE (HESC)

MEDIA RELEASE - 18 DECEMBER 2020



Another cheetah free in the wild

Another cheetah is free in the wild. A month ago, the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre (HESC) donated a five-year-old cheetah to Tshukudu Game Reserve for release into the wild. The cheetah, named Lacey, was initially released into a fenced camp with no predators to ensure that she adapted to her new environment.

Lacey's release formed part of the Southern African cheetah metapopulation programme facilitated by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to enhance the genetic diversity of the limited number of free-ranging cheetahs in the wild and was undertaken with the cooperation of Tshukudu.

When HESC releases cheetahs, the animals go through a process of adjustment or 'rewilding' before finally being released into the wild. For this reason, Lacey spent her first month at Tshukudu in an enclosed area that had a suitable prey base and was free of predators. She was initially provided with meat which was later reduced when she started hunting small game naturally.

Having proved that she could hunt independently and successfully, Lacey was this week released into the greater Tshukudu Game Reserve. Owners Chris and Sylvia Sussens report that within the first 50 metres of her being let out of the camp she immediately and spontaneously chased a steenbok. Shortly afterwards she tried her luck with a baby nyala, but was chased away by its mother. Hot and tired after her efforts, she was grateful for the leg of impala, which she dragged into the thicket. Sylvia says despite the first hunting efforts in the reserve not being successful, she was confident that Lacey would soon perfect the skill, particularly as there were now many impalas dropping babies that would be easy prey.

Lacey was released alone as it is hoped that she will mate with one of several male cheetahs in the reserve. Because female cheetahs are solitary creatures by nature, they are often released singly, while males are frequently released in groups or coalitions. Well-known wildlife veterinarian Dr Peter Stewart Rogers and his team were responsible for the relocation and collaring of Lacey so that her movements can be tracked in the reserve. Troy and Lily Otto of the company Down2thewire sponsored the collar.

Lente Roode, founder and managing director of HESC, says releasing captive-bred cheetahs into approved reserves is an important aspect of HESC's conservation programmes and has proved most successful in the past. She says cheetahs raised in captivity retain their ability and instinct to hunt and mostly survive admirably in the wild, although there is always the possibility of them becoming the prey of larger predators.

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